

“The Gift Of Baptism”

A Sermon By Pastor Jeff Olsen

One of the most joyful and exciting experiences for a family is the beginning of a new life. When a baby enters the world or a couple begins a new life together in marriage, it is a time when we thank God for His blessings and celebrate His grace. As I pastor I am often privileged to celebrate both of those occasions. Recently I visited with a family who welcomed the addition of a healthy baby boy, and they brought him home a couple of nights ago. As a church family we are grateful to God for a healthy start, and we want to surround this family with love, prayers, and support. Also not too long ago I was privileged to participate in the wedding ceremony a family friend. It was a joy to share in the excitement of that new relationship and to see God’s blessing upon them.

As a pastor these are some of the most exciting times for me personally. But perhaps the most exciting and joyful things for me to witness is the new life that occurs when someone begins a new relationship with God and people receive Jesus as their savior. As a church family we are filled with the same enthusiasm that greets new parents in the delivery room, and we are reminded of how God works in our lives through His grace. At such times one of the ways God celebrates and confirms His love and mercy for us is by extending some special gifts including the gift of baptism.

Historically, the Easter season has been a time of the year when the church has often celebrated new baptisms. For this reason I thought it would be appropriate to share a message about “The Gift of Baptism” Unfortunately there are certain pastors who use this subject as a way to posture themselves in opposition to others. In addition, others might just avoid teaching on the subject because this topic has at times been a source of contention for people. So in light of that fact I would like to by establishing in the 1st place A Peaceful Approach To Baptism. In the book of Ephesians chapter 4 v 3-6 Christians are urged to remain united in Christ and to “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to one hope when you were called--one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

I. A Peaceful Approach

On the night before he died Jesus prayed that his followers would be united in a common love for God and a love for one another, and He suggested that one way the world would recognize a true follower of Jesus was through their love for one another. However, in the modern era I think that the church as whole has largely forgotten this idea—especially when it comes to the discussion of baptism.

This is not a doctrine that is meant to divide. In fact, the Bible teaches the opposite. We are urged to unite around the core of our faith—and that includes the Biblical teaching on baptism. Of course, there is freedom in Christ to have some differing practices or preferences on this subject, but I believe that baptism is a gift meant to unite true believers in faith. So when sincere, godly people who hold differing opinions on this we must be charitable toward them. And if a church family can still worship the Lord, grow in faith, and accomplish God's purposes while having different personal preferences on this topic I want to affirm that.

On the other hand in every thing we do I believe that the best way to gain unity is to seek Biblical truth, and so today I would like to humbly look into what the Bible teaches about baptism. Many of these conclusions were formed while I was attending a church with a different perspective on this issue, and it helped me to evaluate the question with an open and honest desire to see what is best. Hopefully, you will have the same openness to grow in understanding as we look into God's word.

Now having said that let's look in the 2nd place at a Primary Passage About baptism. In Mt 28:18-20 Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

II. A Primary Passage On Baptism

Almost every time I officiate at a baptism I read these words of the Great Commission from Matthew 28. These verses are foundational to our understanding of baptism, and a person could easily make a case that this is the single most instructive passage on baptism in the whole Bible. This teaching comes directly from the lips of Jesus, and it is a very early teaching with contains some important truths. First Jesus teaches us that baptism is a sacred act done in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then He shows us that baptism is a key part of God's plan for making disciples or becoming friends with Jesus.

When we are baptized we are entering into a relationship with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit and we are acknowledging Him as Lord of our life. So true baptism is never just some religious ritual, and it always is closely connected with a process of teaching people to obey all of Jesus' teaching. When a person receives baptism he or she is beginning of process of following Jesus and learning to obey His commands.

Now even though most Christians agree about the meaning of baptism, there is some confusion over the question of whether baptism is something we do for God or something God does for us. But when you take a close look all of the verses in the Bible about baptism, you realize that baptism primarily an act of God's grace and it is at time when God does something for us.

For support of this I would like to pause for a quick grammar lesson. By a show of hands how many of you know the difference between an active verb and a passive verb? Well, the difference is simply this. An active verb is a verb where the subject does the action such as "I hit the ball." But a passive verb is a verb where the subject receives the action such as "I was hit by the ball." Do you see the difference? An active verb is something like or "I gave someone a present" and a passive verb is "I was given a present by someone."

Now here is the important point. Every time the verb "be baptized" is used in Acts and the letters of Paul, it is used in the passive voice which tells us that baptism is something we receive from God. Colossians 2:12 makes this very clear when it says that baptism is not something done by the hands of men, but rather it is done by Christ. At its very essence of baptism is a gift of God that points to the cleansing, new life, and salvation offered to us by God.

So now that we have understood a little bit about what baptism means, let's move on to talk about the blessings of baptism. In other words "Why is baptism important and does it convey any promised blessings or benefits?"

III. The Promised Blessings Of Baptism

When people think about a baptism they might consider the question of what takes place when a person is baptized. Does the person simply experience the application of water in a symbolic way? Or does something spiritual take place when the water is applied according to God's word and connected with God's promises?

Well throughout the Bible baptism is closely associated with some promised blessings of God. And as we look at a couple of verses I would point out that baptism is a time when celebrate and connect with some wonderful gifts that God gives to us. You know when there is a birthday or a wedding or other special occasion it is customary to celebrate with gifts, and when a person receives baptism I believe he or she also experiences some gifts from God. Let's look at these gift bags to see what is inside and how they relate to the gift of baptism

Forgiveness & Cleansing

In this first bag is clean white undershirt along with a nice white button down shirt. Now if I want to look my best I will put on a new clean shirt like this. But if I spill on it or I get some dirt on it, I would have to put it in the wash so it can be made new and clean again.

Well this white shirt reminds me of the cleansing of Jesus that gives to us and the goodness of Jesus that covers us. I John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." So when we receive baptism we are relying on God's promises to make us clean, to wash us, and to clothe us in the goodness of Jesus. And this promised blessing is associated with baptism on the day of Pentecost when 3,000 people believed and were baptized. Peter told the crowd to "Repent and be baptized **every one** of you for the forgiveness of sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Filling With The Holy Spirit

This verse leads us to the next gift I want to talk about. How many of you like to drink water? In this second bag I have a water bottle. Plants, animals and people need water or something to drink, don't they? Without water we die. Water is important for life. One day when Jesus was talking to a woman at a well, he asked for some water. He told her that he could give her a spring of living water that would overflow so she would never thirst and live forever.

Later on Jesus talked to another group of people about His ability to quench our thirst and fill us. In John 7:37-39 He said, "'If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.'" By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. And when we are baptized we celebrate the spiritual life and filling of the Holy Spirit that Jesus gives

To us these verses may seem familiar, but they are still amazing. People who have turned away from God can come back to him, find forgiveness, and be filled with His Spirit. And when you receive baptism you are celebrating and connected to the work of God's Holy Spirit in your life.

The Death & Resurrection Of Jesus

In addition, when you are baptized you are celebrating and connected to the death of resurrection of Jesus. This cross reminds us of the fact that Jesus died and rose again for us. On Good Friday Jesus paid for our sins on the cross, he died, and he was buried. But this was not the end of the story for Jesus was it? Jesus also rose from the dead.

So what does baptism have to do with the death and resurrection of Jesus? In Romans 6:4 it says “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” When we are baptized we celebrate the fact that our old life in sin is gone and our new life in Jesus is beginning. One of the reasons baptisms are around Easter Sunday is because this is the time in the year when we celebrate the blessings of Jesus’ death and resurrection. And if you would like to know more about receiving this gift, please come to one of our baptism classes today or let me tell you more about baptism this Easter season.

Family Of Believers

One final blessing comes to mind as think about baptism is a place in God’s family. As I take out this family picture from this gift bag I am reminded of what a blessing it is to have a place where you can be loved and belong and to be part of something bigger than yourself. As we think about the story of when Jesus was baptized, we remember that God told Him and everyone that this was His Son, who He loves. In our baptism, God affirms that we are His sons and His daughters. We are part of God’s family.

Galatians 3:26-27 says, “You are all sons (children) of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

So as you see baptism involves more than just a symbolic act. Rather baptism is a moment when God confirms His promises to wash your sins away, to fill you with His Spirit, to raise you to new life, and to make a place for you in His family. It is a time you can always go back to when God makes His love real in your life and when the relationship is strengthened. And as we look at these verses it seems clear to me that baptism is both an image of God’s grace and an instrument of His continued blessing.

IV. Two Perspectives On Baptism Family & Faith

Now as we continue I would like to spend a few minutes processing two important perspectives to consider when thinking about baptism. And if you think about these two perspectives you will probably have a deeper understanding of why godly people still hold some differently practices with regard to baptism.

For example, there are many people today who have the perspective that baptism is primarily **a celebration of one's faith**. And the key verse for these people is Mark 16 verses 15-16 in which Jesus tells His followers, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."

In this passage from Mark 16 we see that Jesus has given his followers a very important task. He wants us to go into all the world and proclaim the good news about what he has done for us to all creation. This good news is a life changing message, and it is offered to all people. And what is this message? Jesus tells us to proclaim that whoever is believing and is baptized will be saved.

Now there is a very close connection between belief and baptism in the Bible, and to be quite honest this connection was even closer in New Testament times. When people came to trust in Jesus Christ, they were baptized right away—it appears as if they were usually baptized on that very same day along with everyone in their household.

However, to interpret these verses properly we must ask if the primary purpose of this passage is to prescribe a certain "order for salvation" or to ask if a certain type of faith or experience is a prerequisite for baptism. In other words does this passage say that a person must have believed (past tense) and have been saved (past tense) in order to THEN be baptized (present tense)? Or does it state that baptism is a first step that follows after a certain level or maturity or salvation?

When you take a closer look in the original language you will see that this verse reads literally "the believing and baptized one will be saved." This is a grammatical term called a substantival participle which employs two verbal nouns united by one definite article as the subject of the sentence. The believing / baptized one (present state) will be saved (future tense). Notice that Jesus did not insert the word "THEN" (prescribing an order). Rather he used AND with one article (uniting two important components).

Even though some people changed this verse to read YOU MUST (imperative) BELIEVE AND HAVE A SALVATION EXPERIENCE (in the present) prior to baptism, Jesus is not talking at all about baptism requirements or the order of salvation at all. If he wanted to the sentence structure and the verb tenses would have been quite different. He would have said whoever has believed and is saved should be baptized, but that is not what Jesus said

So then what is the main point of this verse which emphasizes faith so clearly? When Jesus says “the believing / baptized one will be saved” He is making a very important point that baptism is not some ritual that has eternal significance apart from a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Being baptized apart from continuing faith in Jesus will not lead to salvation—for whoever does not believe is condemned. So I think his point is simply this. Any teaching on the true nature of baptism should emphasize both of these concepts—the believing and baptized one be saved. It should also reinforce that the not believing one will be condemned. And because of this close connection we clearly teach that every baptized individual must grow to mature personal faith in Jesus Christ to be saved.

So one key perspective for understanding baptism is its connection to faith, and those families who connect baptism to a person’s experience of mature faith prefer to postpone baptism until perhaps elementary school or even middle school. And the rationale for this choice is that such a child might be more firmly established in faith or might be better able to remember or understand this gift of God’s grace. If there are families who prefer this option we will celebrate with them when their children come to mature faith in God’s promises and receive the gift of baptism. For these children their baptism will be a wonderful faith confirming event and a key part of their growth as a disciple.

On the other hand I can say with great confidence that the Bible does not discourage nor prohibit baptism for any child from a believing family—so long as we emphasize the importance of teaching them God’s word and pray that they will come to a mature faith and personal commitment to Christ as Savior.

Now I know it may come as a surprise when some people discover that there are actually many churches that faithfully teach the Scriptures and pastors who clearly preach salvation while also baptizing infants and young children. And it may also surprise people to know that this practice was quite uniform for the church for the first 1600 years of church history. And for those people who emphasize the perspective that baptism is a **celebration of a family** they find a wealth of teaching in both the Old and New Testaments that support this doctrine.

However, one key teaching verse is Acts 2:38-39 in which Peter says, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."

So let's put this verse in a proper context shall we? Peter is preaching on the day of Pentecost to a group of Jewish people. And as they learned about the promises to Adam, Noah, Abraham, and David they would have known that every covenant or promise God made with His people always included the children. For example, when God chose Abraham He gave him a sign of His promise known as circumcision. (which was a removal of foreskin on all male babies who were 8 days old). Some times new converts would come to faith in the God of Abraham and they would receive circumcision as adults. But quite often these young children would be circumcised first, then learn the meaning of the promise and be led into a mature, personal relationship with God. Now does this imply that everyone who was circumcised was saved? No it does not. In Old Testament times salvation only came to those who personally put their trust in God for salvation. However, the act of circumcision was a learning tool that helped to call people into a relationship with God and into faith.

Moving ahead to the times of Jesus, what do we see? Well, first, Jesus invites people to bring their little children unto Him, and He reminds them that He has a place for them in His kingdom. In fact, He says that whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it. Then before returning to heaven Jesus tells his followers that baptism would be a key part of making disciples and it would be closely connected to the teaching them obedience and faith. And then on the birthday of the church Peter says calls EVERY ONE to be baptized. And notice the tense of the verbs. He says, "The PROMISE IS for you (present tense right now)...and for your children (right now), and for the far off people (right now)... and for whoever the Lord will call (in the future).

From this verse we see a clear connection between baptisms and believing families. Since God had always emphasized family relationships Peter invites both adults and children to be baptized. When Peter does this he is not so much demonstrating or confirming their faith (he cannot judge the inward thoughts) but rather he is calling people to faith (making a disciples) and confirming God's promises to them.

Now if we are on the right track believing that baptism celebrates families, then we would expect to see whole families baptized in the Bible, right? Well, guess what in the book of Acts there are 5 times when whole groups of people are baptized, only 2 examples when individuals are baptized, and 4 examples of the baptism of whole households or families. In the story of the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:30-34) the jailer asks Paul and Silas, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They replied, ‘(You) believe in the Lord Jesus, and you (*all*) will be saved—you and your household.’...then immediately he and ALL HIS FAMILY were baptized.” According to scholars these households were not single family units either. They were multiple family units which had a special reference to infants and the youngest.

In the Bible we see examples of people receiving baptism at different times in their life, and the same is true in our church. There are times when adults or children come to know Jesus as their savior and they are baptized at that point. On other occasions a whole family or multiple family members are baptized at the same time (including parents and children). And sometimes there is a service of baptism for a little one.

Of course some people might object by saying that an infant is never expressly named in any baptism stories (as if all of these multiple family unit households would not have little kids). In fairness I will admit that we do not have a separate story in the Bible about a believing family having a baby and coming back to the church for a baptism, but maybe it was so clear to the early church that it wasn't necessary. On the other hand we don't see any examples of any one person postponing baptism. So people have to draw a conclusion or choose what they prefer.

Now I will say that it is not uncommon for people in a family or a church family to see differently on this question, and I do not want to discredit those who have a different emphasis or force anyone to change their mind. But before I perform a baptism of an adult, a child, an infant, or a family I must be able to say with integrity that this practice is well supported in Scripture and in the teaching of the early church. If you'd like to consider some more historical or Scriptural support for this position I would be happy to share some papers I wrote while dating a girl from a Baptist Church (who would become my wife) and attending a church that only practiced believers baptism.

Regardless of your perspective I think there is a lot of room to affirm biblical truth, to maintain fellowship with one another, and to let families seek God's best for their children. In this way we can "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" knowing that "there is one body and one Spirit---just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all."

Well our topic today is "The Gift Of Baptism" and so far we have considered a peaceful approach, a primary passage, some promised blessings, and two different perspectives. But let's finish up quickly with some practical questions and our personal response.

V. Practical Questions

First let's consider the question, is there only one way to baptize?

In Matthew 28 Jesus tells us to apply water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and in Ephesians 4 Paul also tells us that there is one baptism. But the Bible doesn't say how to apply the water or how much to use.

Perhaps you have heard some people say that only immersion in water is a valid baptism. And maybe you have heard others say that sprinkling or pouring is a better way. Well, recently a pastor at a non-denominational church tried to satisfy everybody with a new approach. What do you think? (Picture of pastor with pool and shower combo). Should we try the shower pool combo? I got a chuckle out of that one. But seriously should the way we baptize cause division among believers? No I do not believe so.

Christian baptism is a spiritual "washing" that involves water not matter how much is used. Since Jesus did not specify a single method we do not either. It is commonly taught in several churches that the word baptize means to immerse. And this is true the word can mean immerse. Unfortunately what is not taught is that immerse is not the only meaning of the word baptize. You see any standard Greek dictionary will point out that the Greek word baptizo includes several meanings including "immerse, wash, wet, or sprinkle." And there are a couple of places in the Bible where the word clearly does not mean immerse.

So then what are the two most common modes or methods of baptism? Well one very common and popular type is called immersion. In this scenario we would set up a portable pool just outside of the cafeteria and the person being baptized is placed entirely under water and brought up again.

The other common approach is pouring or sprinkling. In this scenario we have a baptismal bowl on a stand and I take a little water in my hand and pour it on the head of the person being baptized. For infants and young children pouring may be an appropriate picture of God pouring out His love and blessing on a child. For older children and adults immersion is a beautiful representation of dying to our old sinful nature and rising to new life in Jesus Christ. But either type is okay at our church.

What can we expect in a baptism?

Another question that people often ask is what can we expect at a baptism service. In every service I will share a few Scripture verses about God's love for us and about the gift of baptism. To an adult or mature child I will ask questions like this.

Do you believe that God loves you very much and wants you to be part of His family?

Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, who lived a perfect life of love and died for your sins so that you might be forgiven and have eternal life?

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit who fills your heart and helps you to follow Jesus?

Do you desire to repent of your sin and receive the gift of baptism?

In the case of an infant baptism I will ask about their intention to live as a good example and to provide them with access to the worship and teaching of the church so that this child may come to a mature faith in Christ as their Savior.

Of course baptism is not the end of the life of faith. It is always seen in the Bible as a first step of disciple making which is to be followed by a life of faithfully following Jesus. With that I'd like to close with this simple invitation

Your Personal Response

In the Bible when a person wanted to begin a relationship with God by faith in Jesus Christ, they were invited to receive baptism. For example in Acts 8:36-38 it says "As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him." Then later in Acts 22:16 Paul tells his own story of coming to encounter God's grace. Ananias told him "what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized, and wash your sins away, calling on his name."

Here at Grace Community we are excited to see how God is changing lives and drawing people closer to himself. Perhaps today is the first time you heard the good news that even though you have turned your back on God and lived without him, God offers you forgiveness and salvation. If that is the case, you can begin a new or renewed relationship with God today. You can turn from your sin and trust Jesus for salvation.

If you have never been baptized, I would encourage you to consider receiving this gift. Baptism is a wonderful expression of God's unconditional love and grace, and it is an important part of a relationship with God. Baptism includes God's promises of new life, a fresh start, and the hope of a brighter tomorrow. In addition, it identifies a person as a follower of Jesus in the family of believers and it is an instrument of God's continued blessing in a life. We do plan certain baptism service dates as a church, but we are able to share this special event with you at anytime. We also offer classes for adults, teens, and children to learn a little more about what the Bible says about baptism and why this is such an important part of a life of faith.

And if you have already been baptized I would tell you to rejoice in God's work and God's grace in your life and to share that grace with others. God's love and gifts to us are amazing and this is a great time to rejoice in what He has done.

Let's pray.